

The Conversation Class

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The conversation class occupies a unique place in the process of learning English as a second or foreign language. From my own experience in conducting special conversation classes with Persian-speaking adults, I have drawn up a number of simple but important guidelines, some of which I hope may provide helpful suggestions for the teacher of English who conducts “conversation” sessions as part of the regular classroom procedure or as an extra-curricular activity.

Cultivate a relaxed atmosphere

A relaxed atmosphere is conducive to free expression. The skillful teacher can create an atmosphere in which the student feels enough at ease to struggle through a situation to find the words to express himself. The following approaches help to develop the desired relaxed atmosphere:

- 1) **Learn the Student's Name.** In a conversation class, it is especially important for the teacher to know the name of each student. This indication of personal interest puts the student at ease and helps him overcome inhibitions about speaking out in a group. Remembering the names of the students is an art that the teacher can master. The following suggestions will help:
 - a) *Concentrate on the Student.* When a student introduces himself, the teacher should repeat the name at least once aloud and twice to himself. At the same time, he should concentrate on some distinguishing feature about the student and associate it with the name, making a careful mental note of the two. While talking to the student, the teacher should focus his attention primarily on the student's eyes, and he should give the student his full attention.
 - b) *Take Notes.* The teacher should ask the student to write his name on the notepad (which the teacher should always carry to class). This will add visual reinforcement to the teacher's effort to remember the student's name.
 - c) *Identify the Seats and Use the Students' Names.* The teacher may write the students' names on slips of paper and attach these to the students' chairs or desks, to help everyone learn everybody else's name. Participants in a conversation class should never point or nod at each other. Instead, each person should politely address another as Miss X, Mr. Y, Mrs. Z.
- 2) **Give Praise When It Is Deserved.** The teacher should compliment a student when he does well. He should make it a practice to reinforce a good performance with encouraging comments. He should be careful, however, to be discreet along this line, setting high standards for the class.

I often remind my students that my compliments are “expensive” and go only to a student reaching high standards—though I do not require perfection. Perfection is something that is *out there*. What we must do is constantly strive toward that magic point *out there*.
- 3) **Smile.** A smile generates warmth and response. The teacher should not be afraid to smile—or even to give a hearty laugh if a situation warrants it.
- 4) **Speak Naturally.** There is a tendency on the part of some teachers, in their efforts to make the students understand, to speak very slowly, increase the volume of their voice, and over-enunciate words or use artificially emphasized intonation patterns. What such teachers fail to realize is that the student will *learn* these strange practices and carry them over into his own conversation. The teacher should speak as *naturally* as possible in a conversation class.
- 5) **The Student Should Talk, Not Take Notes.** A conversation class should give each student the maximum opportunity to *talk*, and to that end everything should be subordinated. The student should not take notes. A person does not usually carry on a conversation with a note pad and pen in hand.
- 6) **Everyone Should Use English.** The teacher should discourage the use of the student's mother tongue and

should confine his own remarks to English, even if at first the students miss much that is said. He should allow the translation of words and phrases only when the conversation cannot continue without it. And these times should be few in number. Their recurrence would suggest that the teacher is not exercising sufficient control over the conversation as to sentence structure and vocabulary.

Be alert and foster alertness

Since the conversation class provides practice in both *speaking* and *understanding* what is said, the teacher should stay alert and see to it that the attention of the students does not wander. When a student is not paying attention, the teacher can call him back to the conversation by directing a question to him. Or he can ask him to repeat something that has been said. Or ask him to repeat a question he has just asked another student.

I have found these good techniques, also, to discover whether a student has understood what has been said.

Be enthusiastic and engender enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is one of the most important factors in a conversation class. The teacher should feel joy at the prospect of engaging in conversation with students who are putting into practice things learned in the classroom. The student should be excited at the chance to use the new language for purposes of communication. The teacher must remember that enthusiasm is infectious, and that much of the impetus for expression must come through enthusiasm that he himself engenders.

Be patient

Patience, necessary in any encounter with students, is especially important in a conversation class. The teacher should put himself in the place of the student. He should think of how he himself had to struggle to express his ideas when he was first learning a new language. He should think of those frustrating “plateaus” in his own learning, when his ability to learn more seemed to have come to a standstill. He should remember the times when he himself has been afraid or ashamed to speak and someone gave him the encouragement that helped him find the proper words.

The teacher should keep in mind, too, that there is a varying gestation period involved in learning words and the ideas behind them. The teacher must, therefore, give the student the time that he needs. At the same time, he must monitor class participation, to see that no individual monopolizes the time by talking too much or hesitating too often and too long.

The most beautiful moment in the film *The Miracle Worker* occurred when the blind child Helen Keller, through the untiring efforts of her teacher Anne Sullivan, was able to understand the relationship between a word and the idea behind the word. This was the moment when Helen understood not only the word *water* but the IDEA water. Helping the student to such an understanding as this takes both time and patience.

Be sensitive

Each session of a conversation class is different. At each session the teacher must grasp the mood of the class and consider the external factors affecting his own feelings as a teacher.

The teacher must be sensitive to the subtleties of speech, gesture, and facial expressions of the students, for these reveal the way in which a student is thinking or reacting to the situation.

Some students are especially sensitive about making mistakes. The teacher therefore never laughs at a student's mistakes or allows other students to do so. Serious harm can be done to a student whose honest struggles with the language call forth ridicule. Each student must always be taken seriously. There is a time for laughing. *But be discreet and sensitive to the feelings of the student.*

Think

The word *think* should be the watch word for all conversation classes. The teacher should never accept the idea that practicing English must be limited to *talking* alone. He should encourage the students to try to come to grips with ideas, with issues. Some will make the classic statement *I can explain my idea in Persian*. The teacher should not accept this evasion. For the point at which a student begins to master a second language is the point at which he begins to *think* in the language. The conversation class is most successful when the students are thinking in English.

Listen

The teacher should not dominate the conversation! He should try to get the students to speak as much as possible. With some classes, the teacher's role is merely to be a critical listener. With others, he must play a more active role in order to keep the conversation moving.

Making Corrections

What should the teacher do about mistakes in pronunciation and grammar? This is an especially delicate area in a conversation class. Students tend to insist that they *want* to be corrected. It seems important, however, not to inter-

rupt the train of thought of a student or the flow of the conversation with continuous minor corrections.

If, for example, a student mispronounces a word, the teacher may use it later in a sentence. Near the end of the class he may point out the way that word and others from the conversation should be pronounced.

However, the teacher should always correct flagrant violations the moment they are made. He should not let them pass. But he should keep in mind the feelings of the one who made the mistake and make the correction as tactfully as possible. He should always avoid embarrassing the student. Still, he should not overlook the value of an attention getting comment that might prevent a repetition of the mistake.

Suggested topics for conversation

Topics for conversation should be relevant to the experiences and interests of the students. I give below, in random order, some of the topics I have found successful with my classes.

| | | |
|-----------|------------|---------|
| Life | You | Music |
| Death | They | Sports |
| Happiness | Television | Movies |
| Love | Education | Freedom |
| Joy | Experience | Careers |
| Sorrow | Friends | Weather |

My Daily Routine
 Parent-Teacher Relations
 Teacher-Student Relations
 Giving Directions
 My Favorite Color
 The Most Interesting Person I Know
 Telephone Conversations
 Study Abroad
 The Beneficial Role of a Person in Society
 Personal Relationships
 Idioms in English
 Famous People
 Why I Want to Learn English
 Responsible Labor
 The United Nations
 The Best Way to Learn a Foreign Language
 My Vacation
 Cities I've Visited
 My Family

Other activities

Here are examples of other kinds of activities I've used successfully with my conversation classes:

- 1) **Extemporaneous Speaking.** Before the class meets, I type individual topics on small pieces of paper. When the students arrive, each one picks up a slip of paper. I give each student two minutes to organize his thoughts and two minutes to speak. After a student speaks, members of the class ask him two or three questions.
- 2) **Colored Slides.** I show colored slides of interesting places known to the students. As each slide is shown, the students engage in casual conversation about the place being viewed.
- 3) **Book Reviews.** I assign students to prepare and give in class five-minute reviews of books that interest the group.
- 4) **Theater Party.** I sometimes plan a theater party with my class. The movie or play may be in English (preferably) or the native language. Afterward, perhaps over tea or coffee, the students discuss (in English) the play or movie they have seen.
- 5) **Class on Tape.** Sometimes I tape a session of the conversation class. Then I play the tape for the class at another session. This creates great interest among the students. It also enables me to evaluate my performance as well as that of the students.
- 6) **Role Playing.** The most exciting "role playing" I've ever had in a conversation class dealt with the topic of movies. The seating arrangement (about a round table) and the roles of the participants were as follows:

TEEN-AGER

| | |
|-----------------|---------------|
| THEATER MANAGER | PARENT |
| TAXI DRIVER | WRITER |
| CANDY SELLER | THEATER USHER |
| MOVIE CRITIC | CHILD |

MOVIE CENSOR

Before the students arrived, I taped to each of the chairs in the circle a slip of paper naming the role that the person in that chair would play. Each student taking part in one session of the "role playing" was free to choose the role he wished to play. Once the group was in place, the students initiated the conversation themselves.

- 7) **Games and Songs.** The best resource book for games that I have found is Gertrude Nye Dorry's *Games for Second Language Learning* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966). A session of games or songs helps to give variety to the conversation class and to round out the experiences the students can have in actually using English.